

Raise the Wage Act gives power to working families struggling under current minimum wage | Opinion

Rep. Steve Cohen, Guest Columnist

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CLOSEAs many as 22 states and the District of Columbia could see increases to their minimum wages in 2019, according to the National Employment Law Project. USA TODAY

Recent studies show Tennessee is on the lower half of the country when it comes to strong labor laws and unionizing.

Congressman Steve Cohen represents Tennessee's 9th Congressional District.

As Congress has frozen progress on federal labor laws, most states have made vital — and extremely popular — moves to support working families. The result is a crazy patchwork of laws across the country. It's time for federal laws to catch up and raise the bar for all workers.

With Labor Day around the corner, I worry about how an imbalance of power is pulling down our working families. While the economy is thriving for some, most workers are struggling to stay afloat. They face stagnant or declining wages, arduous conditions, and unpredictable schedules.

And the difficult truth is that workers in many places are swimming upstream against even more powerful tides. While most states have passed laws that supersede federal regulations, Tennessee ranks 43rd among the states with strong labor laws. As Oxfam just reported in its annual survey of state labor laws, [Tennessee has one of the lowest minimum wages \(\\$7.25/hour\) and is 45th among rights for workers to organize.](#)

This is not fair to Tennesseans

Our national leaders need to fight for better living wages. For several years, Congress has been dragging its feet on taking steps to improve compensation and conditions for millions of workers, and to address the imbalance of power between workers and employers.

Historically, the federal government has taken the most significant action to pass laws that protect workers. For example, when [President Roosevelt signed the first federal](#)

[minimum wage law in 1938](#), it was a vital move to establish a wage floor for workers across the country. Employers had been paying far less than the mandated 25 cents an hour, and workers were languishing.

As the years have marched on, the landscape in Congress and the administration has changed dramatically. Today, federal labor laws and standards are at a standstill, at best; in many cases, agencies and departments are being dismantled or reoriented toward the interests of big corporations rather than workers. In just one glaring example, the federal minimum wage, [which has not been raised from \\$7.25 an hour in over a decade, now puts a family of two officially under the poverty level.](#)

Raise minimum wage, change lives.



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Hundreds of protesters gather outside the McDonald's at 2073 Union to demand a \$15 minimum wage Monday afternoon. Hoping to build on the anniversary of the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike, members of the organization Fight for \$15 brought in union workers and labor activists from all over the Mid-South area for demonstrations to draw attention to minimum wage issues. (Photo: Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal)

These policies do more than drag down compensation and conditions for all workers: they reinforce and exacerbate long standing inequities by gender and race. Women and

people of color do a vastly disproportionate share of low-wage jobs, and are the ones who bear the biggest burden in these sectors.

For example, while 27 percent of the working population would benefit from a bump in the minimum wage to \$15, [nearly 40 percent of Black and Latina women would see a raise](#). In 30 states, over half of Black and Latina women earn under \$15 an hour and we know they are working hard, long hours and vital jobs.

In general, women would benefit from many of the protections that are common in some states, such as equal pay mandate, protection from sexual harassment, flexible scheduling.

Working families are suffering.

Declining wages make it harder to pay the basic bills every month. Inflexible schedules make it nearly impossible to balance work and family. Lack of paid leave means people are working while they're ill, while children and elders need care. And make no mistake: people want these changes. As huge corporations spend billions to lobby against change, voters take action.

While the Oxfam scorecard provides damning evidence of how far behind we are, it also provides a road map for how to start making positive changes. I am a proud cosponsor of [H.R. 582, the Raise the Wage Act](#), which passed in the House of Representatives on July 18, 2019. This bill would gradually increase the minimum wage over years until it reaches \$15 by 2024.

We can build a robust and more equitable economy that shares the benefits with all our working families. In our state, we can start with three steps that would make a huge difference to thousands of workers: increase the minimum wage, provide paid sick time, and accommodate pregnant workers. In Congress, my colleagues in the Senate should pass the Raise the Wage Act immediately so Tennesseans can finally receive the pay they've earned and the protections they deserve.

Congressman Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, represents Tennessee's 9th Congressional District.